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# Crossing Baseball's Color Line: Javan Emory, Jacob Francis, Hershel Schnebly, and Howard Molden

Mark E. Eberle

This set of essays recounts the careers of four Black baseball players and umpires who dealt with a color line that barred them from participating with most teams of white players prior to the mid-twentieth century. Two of the essays are centered on the 1880s, as the color line was firmly drawn in organized baseball. The third focuses on the years around World War II, as Jackie Robinson was about to break that color line. The players portrayed here were not alone in their experiences, and stories have been told of better-known ballplayers, such as Bud Fowler, Frank Grant, George Stovey, Moses Fleetwood Walker, and Sol White, who played before the Negro Leagues were organized in 1920.<sup>1</sup> However, stories of additional players who crossed baseball's color line can greatly enrich our understanding of this history.

The first essay tells the story of Javan Emory, who played in Pennsylvania during the late nineteenth century for integrated and segregated teams at several levels, from town teams to professional leagues. The second essay recounts the story of Jacob Francis of Syracuse, New York, who was the first Black umpire in minor league baseball in 1885 and 1886. Only one other Black umpire (George Stovey) is known to have officiated in the minor leagues before Emmett Ashford broke the color line in 1951.<sup>2</sup> At the other end of this period in history, the third essay introduces William Hershel Schnebly and Howard "Smokey" Molden of rural Nebraska, who played in semipro leagues during the 1930s and 1940s. As the color line in minor league and major league baseball was about to end, they were the targets of efforts to implement segregation on the diamond at a local level. These are their stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Hurd (2021). • Husman (2021). • McKenna (2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

<sup>2</sup> Armour (2007). • McKenna (2021c).

# Javan Isaac Emory: Multiple Trips across Baseball’s Color Line

In 2015, Paul Reiferson wrote an essay published in the *Southwest Review*.<sup>1</sup> It told the story of how he obtained a glass plate negative of a studio portrait from the late nineteenth century featuring a baseball catcher wearing his uniform, chest protector, mask, and gloves (such as they were at the time). The portrait published in the article shows the player standing in a crouch, as if ready to receive the pitch. Reiferson also described his efforts to learn about the player, identified on the negative as “van Emery.” Reiferson learned that he was a Black waiter and baseball player from Williamsport, Pennsylvania named Javan Isaac Emory.

The image of Emory is one of the iconic baseball photographs of the nineteenth century. Portraits of early Black ballplayers other than a few team photos are rare, but the story of Emory’s baseball career is equally compelling. He learned to play baseball on teams in Williamsport composed solely of Black players, as well as on teams with predominantly white rosters. During the late 1880s, about the time the photograph was taken, Emory played for the Pythian Club of Philadelphia in the short-lived National League of Colored Base Ball Players (also referred to as the National Colored League), an early attempt to organize a major league of Black ball clubs. He later played for three integrated teams in the predominantly white Central Pennsylvania League and for the New York Gorhams, a Black ball club representing Easton, Pennsylvania in the Middle States League composed mostly of white clubs (Table 1). There was even a report that Emory played for the Boston club in the National League during an exhibition game against a team from Toronto. Thus, Emory may have participated in the full range of opportunities rarely available to Black ballplayers in the nineteenth century as the color line was drawn in baseball—segregated town team, integrated town team, integrated minor league team, segregated minor league team, Negro League team, and integrated major league team.

Javan’s father, Enoch Emory, was born in New Jersey in 1820, 1821, or 1822. Enoch married Pennsylvanian Ruth Ann Jones in 1844, and the couple appeared together in censuses through 1900. Enoch’s occupations were listed as waiter in the 1850 census for Philadelphia and servant in the 1860 census for Bethlehem. His 1863 draft registration gave his occupation in Bethlehem as waiter. Subsequent censuses and city directories listed Enoch as a waiter, headwaiter, or cook in Williamsport, where he also operated a catering business. Local newspapers praised his skills. Enoch’s staff at the hotel sometimes included his sons—William, Javan, and Sims—who also assisted with the catering business. The sons continued

**Table 1.**—League baseball clubs on which Javan Isaac Emory played. He also served as the on-field captain of two clubs (\*). All of the clubs represented towns in Pennsylvania.

Year	Dates	Team	League
1887	April 30 to May 16	Philadelphia Pythians *	National Colored League
	June 25 to August 22	Danville	Central Pennsylvania League
	August 24 to August 24	Mahanoy City	Central Pennsylvania League
	August 26 to September 13	Minersville	Central Pennsylvania League
1889	August 7 to August 20	New York Gorhams * (Easton, PA)	Middle States League

in their father's footsteps, working as hotel waiters, headwaiters, and porters in Williamsport and other cities in eastern Pennsylvania. In addition, Enoch and his sons were associated with the organization of Black baseball teams in Williamsport, adding substance to the association of early Black baseball with hotel employees.<sup>2</sup>

According to the census for Bethlehem conducted in June 1860, Javan was six months old. The birthdate reported on his death certificate was 31 December 1859. By 1877, and probably earlier, he was playing baseball in Williamsport. He was listed as "J.I. Emory" in box scores for the Lumber City Base Ball Club (BBC), the local Black team. Also on the roster was his brother, William, who had previously played for Black teams (Independent BBC and Enterprise BBC) and for Williamsport's predominantly white town team.<sup>3</sup>

In September 1877, the Lumber Citys lost to the Casino BBC in Elmira, New York, another Black club. "The game at the commencement of the ninth inning was in favor of the Lumber Citys, and they would no doubt have won the game had it not been for their catcher, who, it is claimed, sold them out." The catcher was not an Emory. In October, the Lumber Citys challenged the Casinos to a rematch "for the sum of \$100," and it was signed by their new "Catcher, Javan Emory."<sup>4</sup> No report of a rematch was found, but Javan was taking a leadership role from his earliest days in baseball.

Through the early 1880s, Emory continued to play for the Lumber City BBC, but he occasionally joined the Williamsport town team and teams in other towns. A report for a game in July 1884 in Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania, just west of Williamsport, was the only instance found (other than the portrait) in which he was referred to as "Van Emory." In 1885, Javan and Sims Emory were joined on the Lumber City BBC by George Stovey, another Williamsport resident, who would become one of the premiere pitchers of the era.<sup>5</sup>

A change in Javan's baseball career came in 1887. It was also a seminal year in the history of segregation in organized baseball. Clubs in the International League (also known some years as the International Association, a minor league) signed Black ballplayers, beginning in 1886. However, in July 1887, the league barred the signing of any Black players not already under contract, which cost Emory a chance to play for Scranton, Pennsylvania, a replacement team that needed to improve its roster. Also that year, in separate incidents involving major league clubs, Adrian "Cap" Anson of the Chicago White Stockings (now the Chicago Cubs) and most of the players on the St. Louis Browns refused to play exhibition games against integrated or Black ball clubs. In addition to these setbacks for integration, 1887 was the year six Black clubs organized the National League of Colored Base Ball Players (National Colored League). Those clubs were the Lord Baltimores, the Resolutes of Boston, the Falls City club of Louisville, the New York Gorhams, the Pythians of Philadelphia, and the Keystones of Pittsburgh.<sup>6</sup> Javan Emory was a member of the Pythians (Table 2).

The National Colored League did not start playing official games until May, but the Pythians warmed up with three exhibition contests in April, losing a match with the University of Pennsylvania and a pair of games against the white minor league team in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> The Pythians began league competition on May 5 and 6 in Baltimore with two more losses. However, they won four of the next five league games in Philadelphia versus Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and New York (Table 3).<sup>8</sup>

**Table 2.**—Baseball players listed in box scores or game rosters for the Pythians of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania while the team was a member of the National Colored League in 1887. The numbers of games in which each player is known to have participated is in parentheses (box scores or game rosters are available for four exhibition games and six league games—details in Table 3). Jackson and Malone pitched and Payne caught in the Baltimore game on May 6 for which no box score or roster was available.

James Aylor (2 exhibition games + 1 league game)	E. Payne (4 + 7)
William Bowers (2 or 3 + 6) *	Charlie Scudder (4 + 4)
Javan Emory (3 + 6)	Simpson (1 + 0) *
J. Forbes (0 + 4)	Bobby Still (0 + 1)
Joseph Hall (4 + 6)	Joseph “J.O.” Turner (0 + 4)
York Hargett (1 + 0)	Norwood “N.S.” Turner (1 + 0)
[William “Buster”?] Hoover (1 + 0)	John Vactor (2 + 4)
George Jackson (2 or 3 + 3) *	William Woods (4 + 6)
William Malone (4 + 5)	

\* The pregame roster in the *Philadelphia Times* for the Pythians’ first exhibition game with the University of Pennsylvania listed Bowers in right field and Jackson in left field but not Simpson. The box score in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* listed only eight players, which included Simpson in left field but no right fielder.

**Table 3.**—Ten league and four exhibition (\*) baseball games scheduled for the Pythians of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania while the team was a member of the National Colored League in 1887. Winners are shaded in gray.

Date	Visitor	Home	Score	Box Score
April 11 *	Pythians	University of Pennsylvania	8–9	●
April 30 *	Pythians	Wilkes-Barre	2–29	●
May 2 *	Pythians	Wilkes-Barre	1–11	●
May 5	Pythians	Lord Baltimores	12–15	<i>roster</i>
May 6	Pythians	Lord Baltimores	3–11	
May 9	Lord Baltimores	Pythians	6–26	●
May 10	Lord Baltimores	Pythians	9–16	●
May 11	Pittsburgh Keystones	Pythians	8–9	●
May 12	Pittsburgh Keystones	Pythians	19–13	●
May 13	Boston Resolutes	Pythians	<i>canceled</i>	
May 14	Boston Resolutes	Pythians	<i>canceled</i>	
May 14 *	Scott ( <i>picked nine</i> )	Pythians	6–9	●
May 16	New York Gorhams	Pythians	8–9	●
May 17	New York Gorhams	Pythians	<i>canceled</i>	

Boston was also supposed to play a pair of games in Philadelphia, but they were unable to make travel arrangements. In addition, the Pythians canceled the second game with the Gorhams on May 17, because they were unable to cover costs. In part, the financial troubles of the teams were the result of lost gate receipts from games that had to be canceled due to rain. The Boston Resolutes were hit especially hard. After playing in Louisville, the club was broke, and players straggled back to Boston as individuals rather than a baseball team, unable to make games on the way. Their travel troubles, and those of other teams in 1887, both Black and white, were compounded by substantial increases in train fares. The well-laid plans of the organizers of the National Colored League were not enough to overcome all of the obstacles that confronted them at the start of their inaugural season. The grand attempt ended before the league could fully establish itself.<sup>9</sup>

During the short season, Emory primarily played second base for the Pythians, doing so in at least four games. He also played one game each at third base and in left field. What position he played in the game on May 6 is unknown. Although Emory was known as a catcher, this duty fell to Charlie Scudder on the Pythians, with relief from E. Payne. Yet, Emory's role with the club went beyond playing. The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* identified Charles P. Stinson as the on-field captain of the Pythians, but the *Philadelphia Times* reported he was actually the assistant manager. The *Baltimore Sun* stated it was Emory who "captained the Philadelphians" in the first game of the season.<sup>10</sup>

What Emory did during late May and early June 1887, after the National Colored League folded, is unknown, other than his attempt to join the International League club in Scranton. When that opportunity fell through, he joined a club in another league in late June (Table 1). It was not his hometown team in Williamsport, which was a member of the Pennsylvania State League. The season for that league had begun in early May, and the team was well settled by the end of June, having already played 32 games. However, there was another league in the region—the Central Pennsylvania League—that did not open its season until June 17, which afforded opportunities to unsigned ball players. Initially, the league consisted of five clubs, but teams joined and departed during the season, as often occurred at the time.<sup>11</sup>

One of the original five clubs was Danville. Emory first caught for Danville on June 25 and played for the club through August 22.\* It was not the first time Danville had a Black player on its roster. In 1886, while a member of the Pennsylvania State Association, Danville's first baseman was Josh Herbert, known primarily for his defensive skills. In 1887, Emory caught for Danville but also played in the outfield and at second base and shortstop. In addition, he was acknowledged as "one of the best coaches in the League," although an umpire once fined him \$5 for "back lip." Besides league contests, Danville earned money by playing independent teams in the area.<sup>12</sup>

For an undetermined reason, Emory left the Danville club after a game on August 22, but he remained in the league. A team in Minersville was added to the league on August 19. Emory was among the players signed by Minersville, but prior to joining his new team, he played third base in a game for Mahanoy City, another league club. With Minersville,

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\* Complete statistics for players in this and other minor leagues of the era have not yet been compiled.



Emory played a variety of infield and outfield positions through September 13, when he was released. Reportedly, he was returning to Danville. However, Danville defeated Minersville on September 16, and Emory did not play for either club, nor was he listed in subsequent Danville box scores. It mattered little. By September 22, the Danville club (and others) disbanded, and Minersville left the league.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing was found about Emory's baseball activities in 1888 or early 1889, but he again played for a league team in August 1889 (Table 1). The Middle States League experienced a rocky season, which included a total of 13 teams based in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, though the league consisted of no more than eight teams at any time. This league added another aspect of baseball's history of segregation and integration to Emory's resumé. The teams were segregated but the league was not. Even this level of integration led to controversy at the end of the season, when the numbers of games counted in the official standings were chosen in a way that awarded the championship to the white team from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania over the Cuban Giants, a Black team representing Trenton, New Jersey.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the Cuban Giants, the league started the season with a second Black club, but the Philadelphia Giants dropped out of the league in June (as did other clubs). The Giants were replaced by another Black club despite objections, as expressed by the *Harrisburg Telegraph*. "There is one colored club in the Middle States League now, and that is enough." Nevertheless, the New York Gorhams, whose roster included George Stovey and Sol White, were admitted to the league and initially used Hoboken, New Jersey as their home. In late July, the team relocated to Easton, Pennsylvania.<sup>15</sup> Their goal was to find a town that would support a professional team through paid admissions to home games.

Finding a town willing to provide them with a baseball park and fan support was not the only consideration for a Black team. When the Cuban Giants visited Easton to play the Gorhams shortly after they moved to their new home, players from both clubs were denied rooms in Easton's hotels. The Cuban Giants were accommodated in Patrick Doyle's hotel in South Easton, and the "Irishman [was] praised for his hospitality." The Gorhams "were compelled to take lodging in a two story dwelling occupied by a negro and his family." A newspaper reported the root of the problem. "Easton hotel keepers, although the statement is not true, claim that all their rooms are occupied." In contrast to the "objection to negroes" by the hotels, the Cuban Giants and Gorhams entertained "a big crowd at the game."<sup>16</sup>

Emory joined the Gorhams in early August, but his time in the league did not last through the end of the month. He caught for George Stovey on August 7, but Stovey left the team, and Emory mostly played right field in subsequent games. As with the Pythians, it was reported that Emory was appointed captain of the Gorhams. The team had started poorly in June and July but was working its way up to a .500 record. Unfortunately, attendance at their games declined, even as the team played better. Following a game on August 20, the Gorhams were unable to pay the guaranteed fee to the Lebanon (Pennsylvania) Grays. On August 22, the Gorhams were expelled from the league, and Emory made his way back to Williamsport.<sup>17</sup>

Now in his 30s, Emory continued to play baseball in Williamsport and nearby communities. Occasionally he played for a predominantly white team, but mostly he

played for Black ball clubs. In 1891, he captained the Kepfords. The following year, he led the resurrected Lumber Citys. In 1893–1895, his team was referred to as Javan Emory’s Colts, whose roster included his brother, Sims Emory.<sup>18</sup>

There is no question Javan Emory displayed leadership on the diamond, as shown by his being named captain of not just the local teams but also the 1887 Philadelphia Pythians in the National Colored League and the 1889 New York Gorhams in the Middle States League. However, he also had a reputation as a “kicker,” passionately arguing calls, sometimes to the point of ending the game. After one such event in May 1894—a game between the Williamsports (the white town team) and Emory’s Colts—the manager of the Williamsports wrote a letter to the *Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin*, asking Emory to control his temper. “If Javan cannot play a game of ball without kicking we wish to state that we will not play his team any more. We try to play a gentlemanly game, and as we charge no admission, we can’t see why Javan should kick so much.” Even in one of his first games in 1877, the young catcher for the Lumber Citys had gotten in an argument with the Williamsport catcher and left the game, as did the center fielder. With the Lumber Citys short two players, the game was postponed.<sup>19</sup>

In 1896, Emory organized a local team under the name Emory’s Cuban Giants. After that, there was little mention of him playing baseball, though he did so into his early 40s. When not playing baseball, Emory continued to work as a waiter and participate in other activities, in addition to raising a family with his wife, Anna Margaret “Maggie” Emory. According to the census for 1910, they had four children who survived. The family had moved to Reading, Pennsylvania, where Javan was employed as the headwaiter at the Mansion House.<sup>20</sup>

It was in 1909, during his time in Reading, that a story was published claiming that Emory had played for the National League club from Boston in an exhibition game against a minor league team in Toronto, Ontario. The claim was made in an article first published in August about Tim Hurst and John “Jack” Stivetts, who had learned to play baseball in Pennsylvania during the 1880s. Both grew up in Ashland, about 45 miles southeast of Williamsport. Later, Hurst served as an umpire in the National League (1898–1904) and American League (1905–1909). Stivetts, primarily a pitcher, played in the major leagues from 1889 to 1899. One of the players they reportedly learned from was former pitcher Billy Taylor, whose major league career ran from 1881 to 1887. As an aside, the article pointed out that Hurst and Stivetts had learned to play when organized baseball was drawing the color line.<sup>21</sup>

It will be remembered that legislation barred [Frank] Grant, the man who afterward won a country-wide reputation as a second baseman and a batsman for the renowned Cuban Giants, and Javan Emory, the wonderful coacher. Emory played in the Tri-County League. It was his terrific batting in a Boston-Toronto game that proved to be the final argument that caused the National league magnates to put the ban on negro players. Thus it was from such skilled players as Taylor and Emory that Stivetts and Hurst got their training into the “inside work” of baseball.<sup>22</sup>

The date and other details of the game between Boston and Toronto were not mentioned, and no record of a game was found. Even if true, the 1909 account of the event

places too much importance on Emory's performance in a single exhibition game toward establishing the color line in organized baseball. Nevertheless, in December 1909, the article was reprinted in the *Reading Times*, Emory's home at the time. It confirmed the original story under the headline, "Emery Batted the Negro Out. Terrific Batting of the Local Man Held Dire Results for His Race." The reprinted article was preceded by an introduction that ended, "The writer knew Emory in his palmy days and can vouch for the following article which recently appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper." In his introduction, the writer also claimed that "Emory organized the famous Cuban Giants," initially formed in 1885 and generally regarded as the nation's first truly professional Black ball club.<sup>23</sup>

The claim that Emory was involved in organizing the Cuban Giants is not true and brings into question the writer's other confirmation that Emory played for Boston against Toronto. Emory's participation in an exhibition game with Boston hardly seems creditable. Then again, stranger events have come to light in baseball's long history. After all, in December 1885, the same year the Cuban Giants were organized, Emory had announced his intention to organize a "colored professional base ball club to play next season throughout Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio. He has secured some of the best colored players in the country."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the memory of the *Reading Times* writer was blurry but not as faulty as might be assumed.

Javan Emory passed away in Philadelphia on 22 June 1923 of heart disease. The notice of his death in the *Pittsburgh Courier* ran under the headline "Former Big League Ball Player Is Dead."<sup>25</sup> The phrase "big league" was a reference to the story published 14 years earlier that Emory had played a game with Boston's National League club, not his time as captain of the Philadelphia Pythians in the National Colored League. Emory was buried in Eden Cemetery, an African American cemetery in the borough of Collingdale outside Philadelphia.

## Acknowledgements

Newspapers were accessed through Newspapers.com. Census records, city directories, and other documents were accessed in Ancestry.com and GenealogyBank.com.

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<sup>1</sup> Reiferson (2015).

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<sup>3</sup> *Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin*, 13 September 1875, p 4; 16 August 1876, p 4; 17 August 1876, p 4; 14 August 1877, p 4; 17 September 1877, p 4; 13 October 1877, p 4. • Brunson (2019, page 27).

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<sup>5</sup> *Lewisburgh Saturday News*, 13 September 1884, p 1. • *Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin*, 21 June 1879, p 4; 15 September 1882, p 4; 2 October 1882, p 4; 25 August 1883, p 4; 12 October 1883, p 4; 23 July 1884, p 1; 5 August 1884, p 4; 25 September 1884, p 4; 29 July 1885, p 4; 20 August 1885, p 4; 7 October 1885, p 4; 21 July 1886, p 1. • McKenna (2021).

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- <sup>17</sup> *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, 13 August 1889, p 1; 19 August 1889, p 1; 20 August 1889, p 1. • *Hazelton Daily Sentinel*, 16 August 1889, p 4. • *Lebanon Daily News*, 14 August 1889, p 1; 15 August 1889, p 1; 21 August 1889, p 1. • *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 August 1889, p 6; 12 August 1889, p 6; 22 August 1889, p 6; 24 August 1889, p 6. • *York Gazette*, 9 August 1889, p 1; 9 August 1889, p 1. • *Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin*, 14 October 1889, p 1.
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- <sup>20</sup> *Allentown Morning Call*, 22 September 1935, p 14. • *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 23 August 1901, p 6. • *Reading Times*, 28 January 1908, p 1; 17 August 1911, p 6; 28 December 1912, p 3; 10 June 1913, p 5. • *Williamsport Daily Gazette and Bulletin*, 11 April 1896, p 5; 12 January 1900, p 5, 6; 12 January 1901, p 6.
- <sup>21</sup> *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 22 August 1909, p 3b.
- <sup>22</sup> *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 22 August 1909, p 3b.
- <sup>23</sup> *Reading Times*, 17 December 1909, p 2. • Malloy (2005).
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## Jacob B. Francis: Organized Baseball's First Black Umpire

Little information is available about Jacob B. Francis, referred to on occasion as Jake. He lived in Syracuse, New York during the 1870s and 1880s before moving to Little Falls and Herkimer in late 1887 or 1888. Information about him quickly fades in the 1890s. Despite the dearth of information (and no known photos), his experiences on the diamond reported in contemporary newspapers document an important achievement in baseball history.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 1870 and 1880 federal censuses and the 1875 state census for Syracuse, Jacob Francis was born in 1851 or 1852 in West Virginia, when it was still part of Virginia. His race was listed as “mulatto.” These are the only census records in which Francis was found. He arrived in New York no later than 1869, when, in October, he married Sarah (last name unknown), a native of Onondaga County, New York. The earliest mentions of Jacob in newspapers reported his troubles with the law. In 1870, he and another man were fined \$10 for fighting. In 1873, he was fined for public intoxication, and Jacob and Sarah were arraigned on a charge of burglary.<sup>2</sup> No outcome of the proceedings in the latter case was found.

In all three censuses, Jacob's occupation was recorded as carpenter, but in 1880, he was also listed as a servant to the family of Reverend Ezekiel Mundy. City directories in Syracuse from 1871 to 1887 listed his occupations as carpenter (seven years), coachman (four years), steward (1879), servant (1880), waiter (1882), and laborer (1885). No occupation was listed in 1887. However, newspapers reported in June 1887 that Francis was a cabman in Syracuse, and in October 1888, he managed a hotel in Herkimer.<sup>3</sup> Francis also earned money in baseball.

Little information was found about Jacob's family. He and Sarah had two daughters. In the 1875 census, they were listed as Luanda A. (4 years old) and Clara E. Francis (2 years old). In the 1880 census, their names and ages were given as Lucinda (9) and Carrie (7). The 1892 death index from the New York State Department of Health included a Sarah Francis, perhaps Jacob's wife, who died in Utica in December. Sarah had been judged “insane” and was committed to the asylum in Middletown in 1884. Less than two years later, she was sent to the asylum in Utica. In February 1893, while Jacob was living in Herkimer, he married Nellie D. Brown.<sup>4</sup> The 1898 death index for New York included Nellie Francis, perhaps his second wife, who died in Little Falls, six miles east of Herkimer. No reports of Jacob Francis were found in digital records after his marriage in 1893.\*

Francis began his baseball career with a Black team in Syracuse named the Pastimes during the early 1880s and perhaps the 1870s. During the 1880s, he also took the field with an amateur white team in Syracuse, the Central Citys. In addition, Francis occasionally played for the city's top white team, the Syracuse Stars, in 1883 and 1884. He was especially busy in 1885. Francis accepted the position of manager for the Pastimes (Charles Jefferson was elected the on-field captain), and he was rumored to be joining the proposed Syracuse Nine. However, newspaper reports indicated he remained with the Central Citys. In addition, Francis played in a game for the Marcellus Grays in August, when they hosted the Geddes Base Ball Club (BBC). His principal position with the Central Citys was center field, but he also played second base and occasionally third base for other clubs.<sup>5</sup>

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\* Another Jacob Francis living in Herkimer recorded in the 1892 state census was born about 1832.

Amidst this flurry of baseball activity, in September 1884, the house at No. 6 Linden Street in Syracuse caught fire. It was rented by “Jacob Francis, colored, and his two children.” His wife was at the asylum in Middletown, and when “Jake” was away, he left the girls on their own, though they slept at the home of John Wilson. It was speculated that the girls had not extinguished a fire in the stove that night, which somehow spread. The house was “much damaged,” but no one was hurt. A week later, the Central Citys, with Francis in center field, played a benefit game against the Unions to aid Jacob and his daughters. The game raised \$33.60, for which he expressed his gratitude.<sup>6</sup>

While it was unusual for a Black ballplayer to take the field with white teams at the time, what was even more unusual was that Francis also umpired games between white teams. The first documented instance of a Black umpire for a game between white teams was in Alexandria, Virginia on the Fourth of July in 1867. The opponents were the Capitol BBC of Washington, DC and a picked nine of three players each from three of Alexandria’s ball clubs—Old Dominion, Pioneer, and Mt. Vernon. The Capitals won easily, 39–11. The umpire was “Mr. [John] Lane, Monumental Base Ball Club,” a Black team in Alexandria. However, the report in the *National Republican* made no mention of Lane’s race. Though we still have much to learn about the history of baseball, James Brunson found no other instances of a Black umpire for a game between two white teams until 1882.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1882, back in Syracuse, “Mr. Francis” was hit in the head by the ball while umpiring a game between the Stars and the team from Union College. Another umpire finished the game in his place. In August, “J. Francis” was back behind the plate to umpire a game between the Stars and a local team named the Athletics, which was making its debut on the diamond. In 1883, Francis umpired again when the Stars hosted the Elmira Telegrams. This was followed in 1884 by a game between the Stars and a team from Auburn.<sup>8</sup> There are probably other instances yet to be documented, but Francis was building a reputation as a good umpire. In fact, when the Syracuse correspondent for the *Sporting Life* reported that Francis was to become the Pastimes’ manager in April 1885, he referred to him as “the popular umpire.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1885, Francis accomplished something no other Black baseballist is known to have done to this point. In April, the *Syracuse Daily Standard* reported that Jacob Francis was “elected” as one of three “official umpires” from Syracuse for a professional league of white teams—the New York State League—which included teams from Albany, Binghamton, Elmira, Oswego, Rochester, Syracuse, and Utica.\* While continuing to play for the Central Citys, Francis umpired league games through mid-July, mostly in Syracuse. He also umpired an exhibition match between the Stars and the Providence Grays of the National League on

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\* George Stovey was the only other Black umpire known to have been hired by a professional league of white teams before World War II. He umpired for the Central Pennsylvania League in August and September 1897. The league included teams in Bloomsburg, Lock Haven, Milton, Shamokin, Sunbury, and Williamsport (Stovey’s hometown). For some unstated reason, Bloomsburg refused to play a game with Williamsport if Stovey was the umpire, even though he had umpired games between the two clubs previously, all won by Bloomsburg. He was also one of two umpires in a league game on July 3 between Williamsport and Milton, won by Milton. (Citations in the paragraph endnote.)

June 22. Later that month, the Utica club was so disgusted by the incompetent white umpire in a game at Oswego that they planned to forfeit the next day's game. They were placated by arrangements to have Francis umpire the game. James Brunson reported a similar event in 1874 in South Carolina, where an incompetent white umpire was used instead of an experienced Black ballplayer proposed by one of the two white clubs. The outcome of the contest was predictably unsatisfactory. As one of the participants explained, "You will see from this, it is a matter of ability, and not color."<sup>10</sup> Likewise in upstate New York.

Francis experienced perhaps his most interesting challenge as a league umpire on May 28, during a game between the Stars and the club from Rochester, in which "a dispute over the rules arose." In the sixth inning, a runner for the Stars had reached third base, with two outs and the Stars down, 6-0. They needed to score. Francis called a "foul balk" on the Rochester pitcher for not keeping his front foot on the ground while delivering the ball. The Stars' captain told the runner on third base he could advance and score the run, but a Rochester player tagged him before he touched the plate. "Mr. Francis immediately decided that Osterhout was not entitled to the run." The captain of the Stars argued against the decision, and the Rochester team crowded home plate to argue the opposite.

Mr. Francis consented to examine the book of rules. This, of course, only supported his original decision, and on it he insisted with more gentleness than is usual in such cases. The delay in the game gave the impression that the umpire was in doubt, but the best evidence leads to the belief that he was right from the start. The lenience of the umpire gave the Stars a pretext for objection, which they insisted on until ordered into the field by President Campbell, who went upon the grounds to reprimand his men for assuming to dispute the umpire, whether right or wrong.<sup>11</sup>

Rochester went on to win the game, 9-5. Although the *Syracuse Daily Standard* supported the decision by Francis, the Syracuse correspondent for the *Sporting Life* snidely commented, "Umpire Francis has given excellent satisfaction to the Rochesters, and they will have no one else in their games here."<sup>12</sup>

Why Francis no longer umpired for the league after mid-July could not be determined. At the beginning of the month, the Stars hosted the Buffalo Bisons of the National League in an exhibition game. The "regular umpires" from Syracuse, including Francis, were unavailable during the holiday or declined to umpire. The man selected for the job was reported to be so incompetent "that the crowd hissed him roundly and yelled for 'Francis.'" Clearly, Francis had not fallen out of favor with the Syracuse fans. Neither had he suffered a falling out with the directors of the Star Base Ball Association. On July 21, a game was played between the directors and the stockholders of the association. There were too few directors to fill a nine, so they reportedly picked up three players—an employee of the *Syracuse Courier*, the team's official scorer, and "Francis, late umpire." However, the box score did not list Francis or the scorer, though they might have been misidentified. Although Francis stopped working for the league, he umpired other games, including at least two in Oneida, in which they hosted the Elms of Utica and the Alerts of Canastota.<sup>13</sup>



The following year, Francis continued to umpire in cities such as Little Falls, Oneida, and Utica. He also umpired the opening game of the season in Syracuse, an exhibition match between the Stars and the amateur team from Oneida. His most noteworthy game was on September 13, when he umpired a contest between Syracuse and Utica in the latter city. Both clubs were members of the International League in 1886, and the match with Utica was “the last championship game of the season” in that city. Thus, Francis umpired yet another minor league game, won by Utica, 9–2.<sup>14</sup>

The circumstances under which Francis was asked to fill in as umpire are unknown. The *Sporting Life* reported the game was played in Syracuse, which might suggest Francis, the hometown umpire, was chosen, in part, because he was available. However, newspapers in Syracuse and Rochester reported the game was played in Utica, which was likely the correct venue.<sup>15</sup> The site of the game is probably a moot point, because Francis was a popular umpire in both Syracuse and Utica.

His continued popularity in Syracuse had been reported in the *Sporting Life* nine months earlier. According to an item in the “Notes and Comments” column on January 3, the leaders of the baseball association in Syracuse still thought highly of Francis, just as they had when they chose him to be a league umpire in 1885. “Syracuse presents three candidates for appointment to an official umpireship in Messrs. Geer, Francis and Adams.” In the same issue, the Syracuse correspondent reported various reasons those involved in local baseball were happy. This included “Jake Francis, because he enjoys good health and can number his friends by the hundred.”<sup>16</sup>

Although Francis was not selected by the International League to serve as a regular umpire, the league had a Black ballplayer in 1886, when Frank Grant joined the Buffalo Bisons in mid-July. Additional Black players were signed by three other clubs, including Syracuse, in 1887–1889. However, the International League (also known as the International Association some years) became the last prominent minor league to field integrated teams when it voted in July 1887 to ban additional signings of Black players. Players already signed were exempt from the new policy, and Moses Fleetwood Walker was the last to depart after playing for the Syracuse Stars during the 1888 and 1889 seasons.<sup>17</sup>

Francis played baseball a few more years for Black clubs in the region.<sup>18</sup> In June 1887, while working as a cabman in Syracuse, “Jacob Francis (colored)[.] the well-known base ball enthusiast and umpire, was arrested” on a charge of larceny, the first known instance of him having trouble with the law since the early 1870s. No outcome of the case was found, but he denied the charge and relied “on his past reputation for honesty to bear him out.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps he was referring, in part, to his reputation as a respected umpire.

That reputation remained intact in subsequent years. In February 1888, as Syracuse prepared for another minor league season (with two Black players on the roster), the local correspondent for the *Sporting Life* pleaded for competent umpires, unlike those hired by the league in 1887. “While on the umpire subject it would be well enough to remark that Jacob Francis, of Little Falls, has given excellent satisfaction hereabouts in games in which he has officiated, and should he be appointed[.] we would be at least sure of one good man.” The plea was repeated in the *Sporting Life* in February 1889.<sup>20</sup>

Jacob Francis, of Herkimer, N.Y., is one of the most popular men that ever officiated as an umpire before a Syracuse audience. An instance cannot be recalled where there was any trouble or delay in a game in which Mr. Francis officiated. He possesses excellent judgement, is quick on his feet and gives his decisions promptly. He is actually the most competent man outside of Messrs. [Bob] Emslie, [Wes] Curry and [Billy] McLean that could be selected. Emslie, Curry, McLean and Francis would make a quartette of umpires that would be a credit to any league.”<sup>21</sup>

The pleas fell on deaf ears, given that the league had instituted a strict color line against Black players that presumably also applied to Black umpires. No recommendation came for Francis to serve as a league umpire in 1890. Syracuse had joined the American Association, a major league, where a Black umpire (or player), no matter how skilled or popular, would simply not be considered. His experience as an umpire in the New York State League and International League could not overcome organized baseball's hardening color line. Nevertheless, the broad respect Jacob Francis earned as the first Black umpire in minor league baseball, despite the oftentimes hostile segregation imposed by leagues, teams, players, and fans, stands as a significant achievement in baseball history.

## Acknowledgements

Newspapers were accessed through Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchive.com, FultonHistory.com, and LA84 Foundation Digital Library (<https://digital.la84.org/digital/>), some of which did not provide page numbers (“p X” in the citations). Census records, city directories, and other documents were accessed in Ancestry.com and GenealogyBank.com. Larry Lester provided a summary of additional information from Syracuse city directories compiled by Larry Gerlach and clippings from the *Utica Morning Herald* from G. Reed Howard by way of Jerry Malloy.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sporting Life*, 17 October 1888, p 1. • *Syracuse Daily Standard*, 10 June 1887, p 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Little Falls Journal and Courier*, 21 February 1893, p X. • *Syracuse Standard*, 15 September 1884, p 4; 5 January 1886, p 4.

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<sup>18</sup> Brunson (2019, page 708).

<sup>19</sup> *Syracuse Daily Standard*, 10 June 1887, p 4.

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## William Hershel Schnebly and Howard “Smokey” Molden: The Persistent Color Line

Nebraska towns have periodically fielded integrated baseball teams since the late nineteenth century, including minor league clubs in 1892.<sup>1</sup> However, that history was inconsistent, as it was in other states. This was true right up through World War II and the reintegration of major league baseball by Jackie Robinson immediately after the war.

This inconsistent history is illustrated in the parallel baseball experiences of William Hershel Schnebly and Howard “Smokey” Molden during the 1930s and 1940s. Schnebly was born in 1913 and raised in Overton on the old Lincoln Highway in southcentral Nebraska. Molden was born in 1919 and raised in Weeping Water in southeastern Nebraska, about 30 miles east of Lincoln and 15 miles west of the Missouri River. Both played mostly for amateur and semipro town teams in Nebraska. Schnebly was a power-hitting catcher and first baseman. Molden was a pitcher known for his fastball.

Schnebly usually went by his middle name, Hershel (often misspelled as Herschel in newspapers). This distinguished him from his father, William Alfred Schnebly. According to his 1940 draft registration card, Hershel was born in Hill City, Kansas on 14 March 1913, as was his father in 1892. Hershel and his parents, William and Bertha, were recorded in the 1920 census at Hill City, but they moved to Overton in late 1920 or early 1921.<sup>2</sup>

At Overton High School, Hershel was a stellar athlete in basketball, football, and track and field (shot put, discus, and javelin). He also started catching for the town’s baseball team in 1929. A photo of Schnebly as a member of the the 1930–1931 high school basketball team was published in area newspapers, but he mostly played baseball and football. He was a “mainstay” of the 1930 Overton High School football team, which was undefeated (9–0), outscoring opponents 282–12. In 1939, while attending Wilberforce University, a historically Black college in Ohio, Schnebly was named to the All-America Negro football team as a tackle his sophomore year. Honorees were selected by votes of their peers on 40 African American college teams. Newspaper reports of his accomplishment listed his weight in the range of 240–266 pounds. The *Pittsburgh Courier* referred to him as the “mammoth Herschel Schnebly of Wilberforce.”<sup>3</sup>



Between high school and college, Schnebly traveled. His parents heard from him in May 1932, while he and a friend from Overton were in Houston, Texas. They had played baseball in Galveston earlier that month. A year later, he went to Sioux City, Iowa to try out as a catcher for the Sioux City Ghosts, a Black baseball team. By June, Schnebly was back in Overton, catching for the local town team. The 1940 census reported he had attended an unspecified school in Flint, Michigan in 1935, and during the summer of 1934, a player named Schnebly caught for the Flint Liberties, a Black ball club.<sup>4</sup>

In 1938, Schnebly reappeared in Nebraska newspapers as a member of the Lexington Minutemen town team. Lexington was the Dawson County seat about 11 miles down the Lincoln Highway from Overton. Lexington was a member of the Independent League of semipro teams. Black ballplayers were not welcome in other communities, but Schnebly had quickly “grown popular with one faction of fans for his general good humor and his

apparent love of the ball game.” Mostly playing first base for Lexington that year, he was considered “fast despite his size and a murderous hitter.” Schnebly was also praised for keeping his head in the game. In one instance, with Lexington leading Stromsburg 2–1 in the ninth inning, Lexington’s pitcher showed signs of fatigue. With the bases loaded and only one out, the Stromsburg batter “streaked a fast hit ball” to Schnebly at first base, “who took it easily” and threw out the runner at the plate. The final batter struck out to end the game. Schnebly’s contribution to the game’s outcome “required not only smart baseball but fast playing to catch the runner.”<sup>5</sup>

Schnebly continued to play for Lexington (and occasionally other teams) through 1941, starting his season each summer after returning from Wilberforce University. Beginning in 1939, however, he left first base and became Lexington’s power-hitting catcher.<sup>6</sup>

Howard Theodore Molden, better known as Smokey on the baseball diamond, was born in Weeping Water, Nebraska on 3 February 1919, according to his 1940 draft registration card. In the 1920 census, Howard lived in Weeping Water with his parents, William and Anna Molden, and four older siblings. In 1930, Howard was living with his parents and three younger siblings. Howard was again listed with his family in Weeping Water in 1940, but his draft card, completed in October of that year, listed his address as Lincoln, Nebraska.

The first mentions of Molden in newspapers were references to a pitcher for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) team from Weeping Water in 1937. The Weeping Water CCC was one of six teams in the Southeast Nebraska Amateur Baseball League, whose players were 18–23 years old. Even at this early age, it was evident his nickname was well earned. Smokey Molden was known for his fastball and the numerous strikeouts it produced.<sup>7</sup> He had also played baseball, football (halfback), and basketball (forward) in high school.<sup>8</sup> Molden again pitched for the Weeping Water CCC team in the same amateur league in 1938. In his first four games, including non-league opponents, Molden averaged 15 strikeouts per game. In game number four, he earned his first no-hitter.<sup>9</sup>

In August 1939, the *Lincoln Star* reported that Molden, “Weeping Water negro pitcher,” had won 19 of 21 games so far that summer. Such reports are sometimes erroneous (the newspaper gave his name as “Henry Molden”), but he was having another good year.<sup>10</sup> His skills had not gone unnoticed, and he was added to the “spiked” roster of the Lincoln All Stars, otherwise composed of white players. The team was about to participate in a 10-team semipro baseball tournament with a double elimination format. Lincoln won the tournament with a record of 5–1. Molden pitched and won games two, four, and six, recording 10, 11, and 4 strikeouts, respectively. After his first victory, the headline in the *Lincoln Star* read, “Negro Pitcher Shows Class.” The second-place team was from Wahoo, the hometown of major league player and manager Sam Crawford. Wahoo lost two games to Lincoln with Molden on the mound, but they challenged the All Stars to visit Wahoo for another game and a wager of \$50 a side. Lincoln was again victorious, and Molden recorded 8 more strikeouts. To close the season, Lincoln arranged a best-of-three series with the Southwest Iowa All Stars, who had won a tournament in Council Bluffs. After Lincoln won the first game, Molden took the mound in game two, defeating the Iowans, 3–1. He struck

out 18, walked one, and allowed only one hit.<sup>11</sup> Molden had gone from Weeping Water to Lincoln and firmly established his reputation as a pitcher.

In 1940 and 1941, Molden primarily played for the team in David City, which was a member of the Pioneer Nite League. David City had been one of the towns in Nebraska to field integrated teams in the nineteenth century. League games were to be played at night, which meant some ballparks had to install new lighting systems. Molden, the only Black player in the league, shared pitching duties for David City with Ray Doty.<sup>12</sup>

It was at this point that efforts were made to exclude Schnebly and Molden from participating in their respective leagues.

The semipro team in Lexington was one of several in Nebraska affiliated with the National Baseball Congress, which ran a national tournament each year in Wichita, Kansas. The national semipro tournament began in 1935 and was the brainchild of Raymond “Hap” Dumont. Organizing a major tournament during the Great Depression was a huge financial gamble, and Dumont hedged his bet by offering Satchel Paige and his integrated team that summer—the Churchills of Bismarck, North Dakota—\$1,000 to participate in the inaugural tournament. Dumont was betting that Paige would help draw enough fans to generate the revenue needed to pay Paige and all of the other tournament expenses. Dumont had already convinced the city of Wichita to build a new concrete grandstand through federal work programs after the existing wooden structure on a nearby site was destroyed by fire. When Dumont gambled, he went all in, and the gamble paid off.<sup>13</sup>

Lexington participated in one of the preliminary semipro tournaments held in Nebraska during July 1939. It would follow the rules established for the national tournament in Wichita, which no longer accepted integrated teams but did allow Black ball clubs to compete. Schnebly had played for Lexington in the local tournament in 1938, but a move was made to bar him and any other Black ballplayers in 1939. The host city’s *Holdrege Daily Citizen* published an explanation of the situation, which included unnecessary terms demeaning to Schnebly.

A semi-pro ruling that mixed teams cannot be entered in competition in semi-pro tourneys bars the fat colored boy, who last year performed the clowning for the entire tourney. The semi-pro ruling does not bar colored teams but it does bar mixed teams. ... The fat colored boy, besides being the clown, was one of the outstanding hitters of the tourney last year.<sup>14</sup>

The *Daily Citizen* reported that Lexington would be “slightly handicapped” by the absence of Schnebly and another player involved in a contract dispute, “but manager Smith of the Lexington team always has some tricks up his sleeves that leave his team among the top-notch contenders.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly, Lexington was not going to lose its star catcher without a fight. As reported by the *Daily Citizen* four days after the initial announcement, Schnebly would “see service in the state semi-pro baseball tourney ... in spite of efforts to disqualify him on the grounds that he was of African descent.”<sup>16</sup>

Schnebly, through manager Smith of the Lexington club, has presented evidence to state baseball commissioner, C.A. Brown, to prove conclusively

his pure Cuban descent. Brown announced late yesterday that the evidence presented was satisfactory to him. The Lexington utility player is thoroughly incensed over intimations that he was of African descent. His parents migrated to the United States from Cuba, according to the genealogy, and Herschel was born at Overton, Nebraska, where he attended school and has lived all his life. He is an American and will go [to] bat with anybody that intimates anything to the contrary.<sup>17</sup>

In truth, Herschel's birthplace was Hill City, Kansas, and the birthplaces of his father and mother were Kansas and Nebraska, respectively. His paternal grandparents were from Missouri and Kentucky, but his maternal grandparents were, indeed, born outside the United States—in Canada. Claiming Cuban or American Indian heritage had long been used in attempts to pass players through baseball's color line. However, as Schnebly contended, he was an American, and that should have been enough to allow him to play in a national tournament program.

Schnebly caught for Lexington during the double-elimination tournament and contributed to the team's first-place finish, with a 4–1 record among the six teams. As an example of Schnebly's importance to the team, he came to the plate with two runners on base in a game against Stromsburg. Rather than face Schnebly, Stromsburg's pitcher chose to intentionally walk him, "but he let a high inside ball get a little too close to what the colored boy likes the best at the plate. It sailed beautifully over the right field wall."<sup>18</sup>

The newspaper reporter continued to refer to Schnebly as "colored" rather than Cuban, but no more reports of challenges to his playing were found through 1941. He ended that season with Lexington as the Independent League's leading hitter, posting a batting average of .382. After another year at Wilberforce University in 1941–1942, he was drafted for military service. Sadly, the big power-hitting catcher and first baseman with a "love of the ball game" passed away on 22 September 1946 from a kidney ailment at a hospital in Omaha. He was returned to Overton for burial. William Herschel Schnebly was only 33 years old.<sup>19</sup>

Smokey Molden spent the final two seasons before the United States entered World War II with David City in the Pioneer Nite League. The team started the 1940 season slowly and struggled to avoid a last-place finish. However, midway through the summer, the league decided to employ a split-season format. With new life, David City played well enough to win the second half, which put them in a postseason tournament with first-half winner Tekamah. Tekamah won the best-of-five series, 3–1. All of the games were close, three being decided by a single run. Molden's record was 1–2, but the blame was placed on the team's weak hitting.<sup>20</sup>

With Molden's reputation as a premiere pitcher in Nebraska, David City anticipated building on its team's success in the league the following year. In February, representatives of the league and its clubs met to discuss the upcoming season. In one of their decisions, they changed wording in the constitution and bylaws to meet the definition of amateur status. Teams would no longer be permitted to have "hired players," but they could have up to three "outside players." "Local players" would have to reside in the team's territory for at least 30 days prior to the beginning of the season.<sup>21</sup>

That was not the only change considered. "The question of whether or not Molden, colored pitcher for David City, should be permitted to pitch for that team again" was also raised. The six clubs from 1940 each had one vote. Fremont, Schuyler, and Wahoo voted to exclude Black players. David City, Millard, and Tekamah voted against a color line. A representative from the town of West Point also attended the meeting, and they would enter the league that year, but they could not yet vote. That left it to President Charles Hood of Wahoo, who had just been reelected to the office, to break the tie. He voted no to the color line.<sup>22</sup> As with Schnebly, Molden was targeted but still allowed to play.

David City, behind the pitching of Smokey Molden, was virtually unstoppable as they won the first half of the season. After seven more victories to open the second half, the league's top team entertained a special guest. Former major league pitcher Jay "Dizzy" Dean would play for West Point in an official Pioneer Nite League game in David City on August 3. Dean had suffered arm problems in 1937 that slowly ended his pitching career. He tried working on a sidearm delivery in the minor leagues in 1940, but it was to no avail. He pitched one inning in April 1941 and then retired as a player. After coaching part of the season, he traveled, making spot starts for teams such as West Point, pitching two innings and maybe playing briefly at second base. In David City, his appearance would be the highlight of the 1941 season, along with the overall performance of their team. Paid admissions to the game were 2,784 adults, and there were children "by the hundreds." (The population of David City in 1940 was 2,272.) Dean was paid \$420 of the estimated \$1,100 raised.<sup>23</sup>

The former major leaguer "told the audience not to expect too much for he was a 'has been,'" but Dean pitched the first two innings for West Point, holding David City scoreless. He stepped up to the plate once, and Molden struck him out. After Dean played his promised two innings, he took over for the local announcer for an inning or two, "creating some good laughs," a sample of his new career as an announcer for major league games. Not surprisingly, he also signed numerous autographs. Meanwhile, back on the diamond, Molden struck out 14 batters, as David City easily won, 9-0.<sup>24</sup>

When David City won its twelfth game to clinch the championship of the second half of the season, Molden played first base. Instead of throwing strikeouts, he contributed by hitting three homeruns. His record of 19-2 was instrumental in David City winning both halves of the season. Unfortunately for the league and its finances, this meant no championship series between the winners of each half. The solution was a series between the champions of the Pioneer Nite League and the Independent League, where Hershel Schnebly played for Lexington.<sup>25</sup>

It was a story made for a movie script. On the eve of World War II, a championship series would be played between the top teams in two predominantly white baseball leagues in rural Nebraska during the Jim Crow era, each with an outstanding Black player. The only Black players in their leagues, both had survived recent efforts to bar them from playing. One was his league's top hitter, the other was a dominating pitcher.

Unfortunately, Schnebly and Molden did not meet on the diamond to close the 1941 season. On August 18, Kearney defeated Lexington, 1-0, in 14 innings to take the lead in the Independent League. Thus, David City and Kearney engaged in a five-game series for the



unofficial championship of Nebraska. David City, with Molden pitching, won the first game, 9–1, but Kearney came back to win game two, 5–3. The next two games repeated the pattern. David City and Molden won game three, 4–3, and Kearney rebounded in game four, winning 2–1 in the ninth inning. Molden took the loss in relief. Kearney won the deciding game, 7–0, in David City, which was without some of its starters. “Smokey Molden had turned in his uniform and gone home.”<sup>26</sup> Eleven weeks later, Pearl Harbor was attacked.

Molden joined the army shortly after the United States entered World War II, rising to the rank of master sergeant. After the war, he married Roberta Lucille Burch in October 1945. They would have three children. In 1946, Howard began writing a sports column—*The Sports Front with Smokey*—for a new Lincoln newspaper—the *Voice*, a Black-owned publication. Lincoln city directories and his obituary listed Molden’s employment as a press operator and binder for a local printing company from 1947 until his death.<sup>27</sup>

Molden also returned to the diamond in 1946, pitching initially for Shelby, Nebraska. The resurrected Pioneer Nite League had voted in March to bar all Black players. As Jackie Robinson was breaking the color line in organized baseball, the Pioneer Nite League moved against the tide of history and instituted a local ban on integration. David City argued that Molden’s presence would generate more revenue through attendance, but the league stood firm. David City finished in last place in the league, but they still put “Old Smokey” on the mound in non-league games as a headliner. In addition, he pitched for Sandy’s, an independent team managed by Charles “Sandy” Silverio. Molden played with Sandy’s again in 1947 and 1948, after the team picked up a sponsor—the Goetz Brewing Company of St. Joseph, Missouri. His photo also started appearing in Lincoln newspapers.<sup>28</sup>



Molden continued to pitch in Lincoln and nearby towns into the 1950s, including the Lincoln Merchants in 1949, the only Black team in the city that year. He also pitched for the towns of Shelby and Seward in the Cornhusker League. In 1952, his sister, Jane, an outstanding fastball pitcher in softball since high school, completed a master’s degree in religious education at Princeton University and returned to pitch for her old team, the Lincoln Blackbirds. It was the last summer of ball for either of the siblings. Two years later, Smokey Molden, who was barred from playing by the Pioneer Nite League in 1946, received more votes from Lincoln newspaper correspondents than any other pitcher as part of the selection process for Pioneer Nite League all-stars since the league’s founding in 1940. Howard T. “Smokey” Molden passed away on 21 July 1971. He was only 52 years old and was survived by his wife, son, and two daughters. He was buried in Lincoln’s Wyuka Cemetery.<sup>29</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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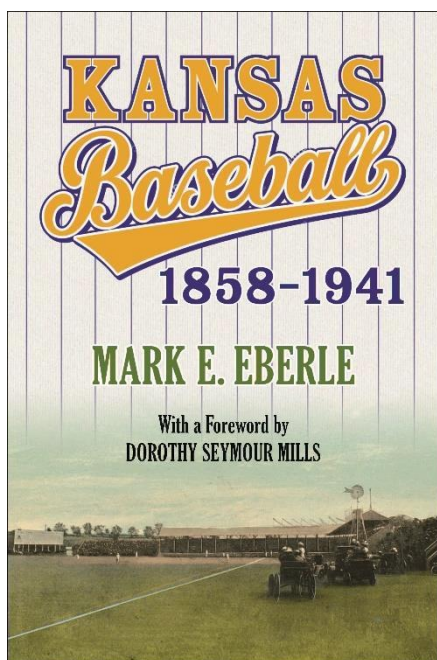
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